

India–Africa Relations: A Historical and Strategic Perspective

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Abstract

India–Africa relations represent one of the most enduring partnerships in the Global South, shaped by centuries of trade, migration, shared colonial experiences, and post-independence solidarity. Despite the absence of a formally articulated “India–Africa Policy” document, India’s engagement with Africa has evolved through distinct historical phases—from pre-colonial commercial interaction and anti-colonial cooperation to contemporary strategic and economic partnerships. Drawing upon historical analysis and policy literature, this article examines the evolution of India–Africa relations, highlighting the roles of political leadership, diaspora networks, South–South cooperation, and post-Cold War economic pragmatism. It argues that India’s contemporary engagement with Africa reflects a hybrid model that combines normative commitments with strategic interests, positioning the relationship as a mutually beneficial partnership rather than a hierarchical donor–recipient framework.

Keywords: India–Africa relations, South–South cooperation, diaspora, non-alignment, energy security, Global South

Introduction

India’s engagement with Africa occupies a distinctive place in its foreign policy, characterized by historical depth, ideological affinity, and growing strategic relevance. Unlike other external actors, India’s relationship with Africa predates colonial intervention and is rooted in long-standing commercial and cultural exchanges across the Indian Ocean. Although India lacks a single comprehensive policy document outlining its approach to Africa, its actions over time reveal a coherent—if evolving—strategy that balances ethical considerations with material interests.

This article traces the historical evolution of India–Africa relations and examines how these ties have adapted to changing global and regional dynamics. It situates India’s Africa engagement within broader debates on South–South cooperation, post-colonial solidarity, and emerging power diplomacy.

Pre-Colonial and Early Historical Connections

India and Africa have been connected since antiquity through maritime trade routes sustained by monsoon winds. Archaeological evidence, including the circulation of Indian glass beads and textiles along the East African coast, demonstrates the depth of early economic integration (Singh, 2006). Indian merchants were active in ports such as Zanzibar, Mozambique, and Madagascar long before European colonial expansion.

The Chola dynasty of southern India (c. 3rd century CE) emerged as a dominant maritime power, trading spices, textiles, camphor, and precious stones with Africa, Arabia, and Persia. These exchanges facilitated not only commerce but also cultural interaction and population movement, establishing durable interregional linkages (Chhabra, 1989).

Colonial Rule and the Indian Diaspora in Africa

Colonialism reshaped India–Africa relations by institutionalizing Indian migration to Africa. Under British rule, Indian traders and indentured laborers were relocated to East and Southern Africa to serve colonial economic interests. As a result, substantial Indian communities emerged in present-day Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa, Zambia, and Mauritius.

Today, approximately two million persons of Indian origin reside in Africa, constituting an important social and economic bridge between the two regions (Government of India, 2010). In South Africa, the Indian diaspora—one of the oldest outside the subcontinent—played a significant role in commerce and political mobilization against racial discrimination (Reddy, 2008).

Anti-Colonial Solidarity and the Nehruvian Phase

India's independence in 1947 preceded that of most African states and served as a powerful symbol of anti-colonial success. Mahatma Gandhi's political activism in South Africa (1893–1914) profoundly influenced African nationalist movements. His philosophy of non-violent resistance inspired leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, and Tom Mboya (Gupta, 1983).

Jawaharlal Nehru further institutionalized India–Africa solidarity through his advocacy of Afro-Asian cooperation and leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). India’s foreign policy during this period emphasized decolonization, racial equality, and resistance to imperialism, laying the normative foundations of India–Africa relations (Chhabra, 1989).

Post-Independence Engagement (1950s–1980s)

Between the 1950s and 1980s, India actively supported African liberation struggles and opposed apartheid in international forums. Under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, India strengthened political ties with African leaders and consistently supported African positions in multilateral institutions. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi further reinforced these ties through initiatives such as the Africa Fund, reflecting India’s commitment to development-oriented cooperation (Mathews, 2008).

During this period, India’s engagement with Africa was largely ideological and political, with limited economic depth. Nevertheless, it reinforced India’s image as a reliable partner of the developing world.

Post-Cold War Transformation and Economic Reorientation

The end of the Cold War marked a turning point in India–Africa relations. India’s economic liberalization in the early 1990s prompted a shift from ideologically driven diplomacy to pragmatic engagement. As global powers temporarily reduced their focus on Africa, India expanded its presence through trade, investment, and development cooperation (Beri, 2003).

Africa assumed new importance for India’s energy security, export markets, and investment opportunities. Indian companies—both public and private—invested heavily in sectors such as hydrocarbons, mining, pharmaceuticals, information technology, and infrastructure (Dubey, 2010).

Energy Security and Strategic Cooperation

Energy security has emerged as a central driver of India’s Africa engagement. With rising domestic consumption and declining self-sufficiency, India increasingly turned to Africa

to diversify its energy sources and reduce dependence on the Middle East (Sharma & Mahajan, 2007).

Indian public-sector enterprises such as ONGC Videsh Limited have made significant investments in African hydrocarbon sectors, while the Government of India has extended multiple lines of credit to support infrastructure and capacity-building initiatives (Bhatia, 2010). These efforts reflect a strategic partnership model rather than extractive engagement.

Peacekeeping, Defense, and Multilateral Cooperation

India has been one of the largest contributors to United Nations peacekeeping missions in Africa, reinforcing its commitment to international peace and security (Singh, 2007). Indian troops have participated in operations across the continent, enhancing India's credibility as a responsible global actor.

Defense cooperation, maritime security collaboration, and training programs further strengthen India's strategic engagement with African states (Antony, 2008).

South–South Cooperation and Development Partnership

Contemporary India–Africa relations are best understood within the framework of South–South cooperation. Africa's resource endowments and development needs complement India's strengths in affordable technology, pharmaceuticals, education, and capacity building. Unlike traditional donor-recipient models, India emphasizes mutual benefit, local capacity creation, and long-term sustainability (Sheth, 2008).

India's membership in institutions such as the African Capacity Building Foundation and its support for NEPAD underscore its commitment to African-led development initiatives.

Conclusion

India–Africa relations have evolved from ancient commercial interaction and anti-colonial solidarity to a multidimensional strategic partnership. While economic and energy considerations now play a greater role, India's engagement continues to be shaped by historical affinity, diaspora ties, and normative commitments to equality and mutual

respect. As India's global role expands, its partnership with Africa is likely to remain a cornerstone of its foreign policy, offering a distinctive model of South–South cooperation in an increasingly multipolar world.

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